DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 355 031 PS 021 218

AUTHOR	Salganik, Laura H.; Carver, Rebecca L.
TITLE	Information about Schools of Choice: Strategies for Reaching Families. Report No. 5.
INSTITUTION	Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and Children's Learning.
SPONS AGENCY	Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, D.C.; Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	Mar 92
CONTRACT	R117Q00031
NOTE	37p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning, Johns Hopkins University, 3505 North Charles Street, Baltimore, MD 21215 ($5.10).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Elementary Secondary Education; *Equal Education; *Family School Relationship; *Information Dissemination; Information Needs; *Information Systems; *Public Schools; *School Choice; School Community Relationship
IDENTIFIERS	Information Analysis; *Information Equity; Information Format; Printed Materials

ABSTRACT

This report discusses the findings of a study of information about public school choice plans provided to families in the United States during the 1990-91 school year. The report evaluates information collected from school districts, state departments of education, national and local nonprofit organizations promoting informed participation in school choice plans, and the federal government. The materials are evaluated within a framework consisting of three components: (1) the content of the information; (2) the format used to present the information; and (3) the methods used for distribution of the information. The report discusses the ways in which information systems have been designed to deal with equity issues, and raises concerns about the factors that lead to inequitable availability of information. The report concludes by noting the lack of quantitative information included in the materials and the important role of in-person experiences in the process of communicating information about schools to parents. Appended is a list of materials about schooling options. (MM)

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CENTER ON FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES, SCHOOLS & CHILDREN'S LEARNING

Information about Schools of Choice:

Strategies for Reaching Families

Laura H. Salganik
Rebecca L. Carver

Report No. 5 / March 1992

PS 021218

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Consortium Partners

Boston University, School of Education,
Institute for Responsive Education,
605 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA 02215 (617) 353-3309 fax:(617) 353-8444
The Johns Hopkins University,
3505 North Charles St., Baltimore, MD 21218 (410) 516-0370 fax:(410) 516-6370
The University of Illinois, 210 Education Building,
1310 S. Sixth Street, Champaign, IL 61820 (217) 333-2245 fax:(217) 333-5847
Wheelock College,
45 Pilgrim Road, Boston, MA 02215 (617) 734-5200 fax: (617) 566-7369
Yale University,
310 Prospect Street, New Haven, CT 06520 (203) 432-9931 fax (203) 432-9933

For more information on the work of the Center, contact:
Owen Heleen, Dissemination Director,
Institute for Responsive Education,
605 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA 02215 (617) 353-3309 fax:(617) 353-8444

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Published by the Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning. The Center is supported by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U. S. Department of Education (R117Q 00031) in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The opinions expressed are the authors' own and do not represent OERI or HHS positions or policies.

CENTER ON FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES, SCHOOLS & CHILDREN'S LEARNING

The nation's schools must do more to improve the education of all children, but schools cannot do this alone. More will be accomplished if families and communities work with children, with each other, and with schools to promote successful students.

The mission of this Center is to conduct research, evaluations, policy analyses, and dissemination to produce new and useful knowledge about how families, schools, and communities influence student motivation, learning, and development. A second important goal is to improve the connections between and among these major social institutions.

Two research programs guide the Center's work: the Program on the Early Years of Childhood, covering children aged 0-10 through the elementary grades; and the Program on the Years of Early and Late Adolescence, covering youngsters aged 11-19 through the middle and high school grades.

Research on family, school, and community connections must be conducted to understand more about all children and all families, not just those who are economically and educationally advantaged or already connected to school and community resources. The Center's projects pay particular attention to the diversity of family cultures and backgrounds and to the diversity in family, school, and community practices that support families in helping children succeed across the years of childhood and adolescence. Projects also examine policies at the federal, state, and local levels that produce effective partnerships.

A third program of Institutional Activities includes a wide range of dissemination projects to extend the Center's national leadership. The Center's work will yield new information, practices, and policies to promote partnerships among families, communities, and schools to benefit children's learning.

Author Information

Laura H. Salganik is a Principal and Senior Research Analyst and Rebecca L. Carver is a Research Associate at Pelavin Associates, Washington D.C.

Abstract

This report discusses the findings of a study of information provided to families about public school choice plans in the United States during the 1990-91 school year. A framework is prsented that describes systems that provide information to families about school choice that consists of three components: the content of the information, the format used to present the information, and the methods used for distribution of the information. These three components influence what families know about their choices and which families are likely to receive and understand the information. The report discusses how information systems have been designed to meet equity issues and raises concerns about the factors that lead to inequitable availability of information. The report concludes by noting the lack of quantitative information included in the materials and the important role of in-person experiences for communicating information about schools to parents.

Introduction

Allowing more families to choose the schools their children attend is an often recommended measure for reforming American schools. The rationale behind this position is that because parents want their children to attend good schools, allowing families to choose the schools their children attend will serve as a force for improvement. Existing schools that are not selected by enough families will develop new strategies, and those that are selected will be motivated to continue to provide an education that satisfies their parents.

However, creating a situation in which this scenario actually happens entails more than changing school assignment policies. Beginning with the seminal proposal for education vouchers developed by the Center for the Study of Public Policy in Cambridge, Massachusetts (1970) and continuing through recent commentaries and guides (e.g., Clune and Witte, 1990; Nathan, 1989; ASCD, 1990; Randall and Geiger, 1991), it has been widely recognized that institutional supports are necessary if school choice is to stimulate improved education for a majority of students. Among these supports are policies to encourage diverse educational programs, provide transportation, and inform parents about their options.

The rationale for providing information is typically related to the marketplace model for school choice (e.g., Bridge, 1978; Levin, 1990). One of the characteristics of a competitive market is that both producers and consumers have the information needed to make efficient decisions. If they are to enjoy the benefits of the marketplace, families must have information about what educational options are available and how to take advantage of these options. To make a choice plan viable, families need to know that they have a choice, what options they may choose among, and how their choices will be used to assign their children to schools. To make a choice plan equitable, the information needs to be accessible and understandable to all families.

Although proponents of choice agree that information should be provided to parents, questions about whether adequate information will be available are a standard element of cautions about using the market as a model for provision of schooling (e.g., Weiss, 1990; Elmore, 1990). Bridge (1978) points out that the fact that school choice plans and options for parents often change makes it even more difficult to keep families informed.

In spite of the role attributed to information and the rapid growth in opportunities for parents to choose schools, little is known about the extent of efforts that are made to provide information to parents when school choice plans are implemented, and about how these efforts are designed.

This paper discusses the findings of a study of information provided to families about public school choice plans in the United States during the 1990-91 school year. Our major purpose was to collect prepared materials, but we inquired about all strategies used by schools and related organizations to increase families' knowledge about their schooling options. Although we recognize the importance of informal exchanges of information about schools (through friends and acquaintances), our work is limited to formal mechanisms.

Information was gathered from school districts, state departments of education, national and local nonprofit organizations promoting informed participation in school choice plans, and the Federal government. We also interviewed education researchers, program evaluators, and representatives of business communities who have been involved in developing information about choice systems. Although we attempted to obtain materials from each of the states and districts that are currently operating major choice projects, we did not contact every school district in the country that allows parents to choose among public schools for their children. Appendix A lists the areas from which we obtained materials.

We first propose a framework for describing systems that provide information to families about school choice. The framework consists of three components: the **content** of the information, the **format** used to present the information, and the methods used for **distribution** of the information. Together, the content, format, and distribution of information influence what families know about their choices and which families are likely to receive and understand the information.

After describing these components, we discuss how information systems have been designed to meet equity issues, and we raise concerns about factors that lead to inequitable availability of information. We conclude by noting the lack of quantitative information included in the materials and the important role of in-person experiences for communicating information about schools to parents.

Content

The purpose of information systems is to communicate particular content to parents in two broad areas: the supply of educational options, and how families can exercise their demands (i.e., express their choices) in the market of educational programs. Both of these are crucial to the successful operation of choice plans. Exhibit 1 shows an outline of content areas that are addressed by the informational materials that we have examined.

Exhibit 1

CONTENT AREAS FOR INFORMATION ON CHOICE PLANS

A. The supply of options

1. The existence of choice
2. The geographic boundaries of the choice plan
3. Types of program offerings
4. Specific schools and programs

B. How to exercise demand

1. Decision-making
2. Applying for schools
3. How requests are processed

The Supply of Options

Information about the supply of options explains to families what choices are available to them. Materials may provide information on the existence of choice, geographic boundaries of the choice plan, types of program offerings, or specific schools or programs.

The Existence of Choice

The first thing families -- and students themselves -- need to know to benefit from a school choice plan is that it exists -- that they can request to attend a particular

school. For those who have never thought about attending or sending their children to a school other than the one assigned to them by their district, the possibility needs to be introduced. The following examples indicate how this is being done.

In Boston, Massachusetts, middle school students are told:

> "If you think shopping for
> sneakers is a kick, try shop-
> ping for a high school.
>
> Yeah, a whole high school:
> teachers, classes, books, even
> cafeteria food!
>
> And if you're in the eighth
> grade, you can do just that:
> shop around and "buy" the
> best high school for you.
>
> You have lots to choose
> from, and Boston's high
> schools are a real bargain:
> they're all *free*."

This appears in the beginning of An Exercise in Decision Making: Choosing a High School, a publication targeted to students in the process of selecting the high school they would like to attend.

In Tacoma, Washington, students are initially assigned to neighborhood schools but parents have the option of requesting that their children be allowed to attend other schools in the district through the "Optional Enrollment Program." Parents are informed about the Optional Enrollment Program at the same time they are notified about the preliminary school assignments for their children. For example, the letter sent "To Parents of Fifth Grade Students" reads:

> "Your son/daughter may make application to attend one of the other nine Tacoma School District middle schools under the OPTIONAL ENROLLMENT PROGRAM."

The Minnesota State Department of Education does a number of things to inform people that school choice is available to families in the state. One advertisement placed in newspapers in Minneapolis and St. Paul has a picture of a teenaged boy and a large bold caption that reads:

"If he wants to quit school, he doesn't need a lecture.
He needs an alternative."

A brief description of the Graduate Incentives Program and phone numbers for more information accompany the picture and caption.

The above illustrations show how the idea of school choice is communicated to parents and students. Once families know that choice exists, they need to know more specifically what their options are.

The Geographic Boundaries of Choice

The first question families are likely to ask after learning about choice is "what schools can I attend under the plan?" They will want to know:

Whether the plan includes all the public schools in the district;

Whether it spans more than one district, and if so, which districts participate;

Whether it includes private as well as public schools, and under what conditions;

Whether it includes educational opportunities provided by non-profit organizations or institutions of higher education; and

Whether any other educational opportunities are available through the program.

Frequently, the choices in a school district choice program are conveyed by identifying the collection of schools participating in the program. Many districts use maps. The Memphis, Tennessee "Optional Schools" program booklet (called *Memphis City Schools: Optional Schools*) includes a map of Memphis that shows the location of all participating schools. The booklet describing Chicago's "Options for Knowledge" choice program includes two maps that show the locations of elementary schools and high schools, respectively. In each case, people can get an idea of the general

geographical areas in which various programs are offered. This is important to families that may not be familiar with where different schools are located.

Information about what choices are available is usually fairly straightforward, but can become complicated when local and statewide plans are operating simultaneously. In such cases, the options available to families are affected by two school choice plans. Families may have a complete set of materials about local options, but they don't have complete information about all their options if those materials don't include the options in neighboring districts that are available under the state plan. For example, families in Minneapolis may read a booklet on schools in Minneapolis' choice plan and think it is comprehensive while, in fact, an Area Learning Center in Minneapolis or schools in St. Paul that are not included in this booklet may also be available to them through the state choice initiative. The need to clarify the domain of options for families who can take advantage of multiple choice plans will probably increase as states that have district-level choice plans enact their own choice legislation.

Types of Program Offerings

Informational materials that describe schools of choice commonly use brief names designating the type of program they offer. For example, schools are often described as "fundamental," "alternative," "magnet," or "Montessori."

Prince George's County Public Schools, Maryland, produced a booklet entitled *A School System of Choices* in which schools are grouped by type of program. The types vary from those defined by curricular themes to those based on the teaching methodology employed. Under each heading (e.g., Local, Comprehensive Schools; Science and Technology; Talented and Gifted; Montessori) the booklet describes the type of program and lists the names and phone numbers of schools that house the program.

A brochure entitled *Magnet School Programs*, produced in Montgomery County, Maryland, describes the types of magnet programs that are available: The Academy; Communications Arts; Computer; Foreign Language; Gifted and Talented; Math/Science; and Reading/Language Arts. A grid shows which schools offer each type of program.

Choices available through the Memphis Optional Schools plan are described through program categories. These include Montessori, individually guided education,

creative and performing arts, enriched academics and college preparatory, and open education.

Although these succinct designations of program types can communicate a great deal of information, they also introduce uncertainty and confusion. The program types may be unfamiliar to many families, or parents may have images of what they mean that are not consistent with how the terms are being used. For example, the term "fundamentals," may conjure images of phonics booklets, strict discipline, and uniforms, but these may not be accurate for any particular "fundamentals" school. Similarly, many parents, even those with a college education, do not really know what the Montessori approach to education is.

Also, the designations frequently target only one distinguishing aspect of the school's program. For example, some are identified primarily by their teaching philosophy (e.g, open education); others by their thematic approach to curriculum design (e.g., the arts or sciences), and others by whether students are primarily drawn from a zone or from the entire district (e.g., magnet). Informing families that a school is a magnet leaves unanswered what program it offers; similarly, informing families that a school emphasizes the sciences doesn't reveal its approach to teaching.

A newspaper produced by the St. Paul Public Schools recognizes that some terms may be unfamiliar and explains them further. The paper asks, and then answers, some basic questions about types of schools, including "What is a magnet and a specialty school?"; and "How do magnet schools differ from neighborhood schools?". The answer to the first question reads:

> "Magnet and specialty schools have a particular focus or emphasis designed to meet the needs and interests of students and parents. A magnet attracts students from the entire city and is an important component of St. Paul's voluntary desegregation plan."

Informational materials that refer to types of programs usually include some illustrative material about the schools which offer the programs. Although (as we discuss in the next section) these allow families to learn about actual examples of where the programs are implemented, they do not generally elaborate on what is meant by the general designations used to describe the programs.

Information on Specific Schools and Programs

The ultimate purpose of information about school choice plans is to help families select particular schools for their children. Although materials about the geographic boundaries of a choice plan and about types of programs offered may help families to narrow their options, the key knowledge needed to choose a school is information about the individual schools themselves.

Distinguishing features of schools can be summarized with respect to any number of factors. For example, materials that describe a magnet school specializing in math and science that uses an open class approach to learning may ideally include:

- That the school is designed to attract students from throughout a district;
- That its curriculum focuses on mathematics and science;
- That it uses an open-class approach to learning;
- Its resources and location;
- Its educational goals;
- The experience of its faculty;
- School climate;
- The performance of its students; and
- Any other features that make it significantly different from other schools.

Not surprisingly, providing a full description of all aspects of a school and its functioning is beyond the scope of the materials we examined. Typically, descriptions of individual schools are either included in directories or are stand-alone brochures or fliers. They include the school's location and phone, entrance requirements if applicable, several paragraphs of text or a list of bullets, and instructions about how to get more information. Often, they leave the impression that their goal is to provide an introduction and not comprehensive information about the school.

One influence on what is included in informational materials is who produces them. Information about schools is prepared and distributed by a number of parties, including individual schools, school systems, non-profit organizations and for-profit publishers. For individual schools, the major purpose of the information is to reflect positively on themselves. School districts and non-profit organizations produce materials to help families become familiar with a selection of schools, the purpose of which is to allow families to compare schools with one another. In addition, some

information is also produced privately to help parents learn about a set of school options, with no allegiance to any particular ones.

San Jose, California has a school choice system in which individual schools actively recruit students from lower grades in the school system. The school system provides families with a booklet that devotes one page to the description of each school and includes which, if any, business has "adopted" the school, as well as basic information on program offerings.

Beyond that, individual schools provide their own information to families. The Abraham Lincoln Academic, Creative and Performing Arts Magnet School, in San Jose, recruits heavily; consequently, Lincoln presents families with a lot of information. The topics covered in information that Lincoln gives to potential students and their parents includes:

Resources and accolades for their resources. For example, "Largest and most sophisticated Apple IIcx learning lab in California. Recognized by Yamaha Corporation of America as the most advanced computer assisted learning lab in the nation."

Student activities and accomplishments. For example, "Academic decathlon...students compete in ten subject areas including economics, fine arts, language and literature, mathematics..., Lincoln students placed second...."

Course and extracurricular offerings. Lincoln lists a number of programs on a printed flyer and asks prospective students or parents to indicate which are of interest to them. More information is promised during a personalized tour based on the preferences checked. Some of the options listed are "competitive dance team, academic programs, orchestra, foreign language program, drama tour group and marine biology." The form itself gives an overview of what is offered by virtue of the list of options.

Indications of student performance. Since Lincoln is a performing arts school, students in the school perform for students from other schools and for the community.

In each case, the emphasis is on making Lincoln an attractive option for families.

The Boston Public Schools has compiled a booklet that includes all the schools and reports parent comments about why they chose that school. This, in effect, allows the information available to be influenced by what parents have found attractive in the past.

In Minneapolis, the school system produces brochures for each school. The brochures include information about school characteristics, student characteristics, student activities, programs, course requirements, and the number of community service hours required of students (if applicable). Each brochure has a contact name, phone number and address for more information about the school. The brochures also list the phone number and address for more information about schools of choice in general. In addition to individual school brochures, the Minneapolis Public Schools also produces more general booklets, such as *A Guide to High School Programs*, which includes all the information about high schools contained in the individual brochures.

To supplement the information provided through the school systems, the Citizen's League produced a book entitled *The School Book* that presents information by district on schools around Minneapolis and St. Paul. *The School Book* includes a list of common elements of all schools in the area, and one page summaries of information about each school. Each school description in *The School Book* includes a short narrative written by a representative of the school that describes its characteristic features and lists information about the school's nearest [public transportation] bus stop, building and facilities, total enrollment and class sizes, extracurricular programs, equipment/technology, grading system, parent communications (parent organizations, number of parent conferences, etc.), policy about honoring parent choice of teacher, and additional services (such as a breakfast program).

Despite the trend in education to request academic performance data as a measure of a school's success and as a means of accountability, the materials about schools of choice provide little information about students' academic success. Families are sometimes told that students score well above the district/state/national average on tests or, as is the case at San Jose's Lincoln High School, families might be told how many students are in advanced placement classes and even how many students passed the advanced placement exams, but this is an exception rather than a rule and the information is usually incomplete. For instance, data are not given on the whole school

population or the exact scores are not disclosed unless specifically requested through official channels and procedures.[1]

How to Exercise Demand

Families can take advantage of the school options supplied in an educational market only if they know how to exercise their demands by requesting particular schools. This multi-stage process includes selecting the schools that best meet their needs and applying for acceptance at those schools.

Decision-Making

Choosing a school involves recognizing the decision to be made, identifying considerations, prioritizing considerations, and making a decision that reflects those priorities and considerations. This process may seem overwhelming, especially when parents have never chosen a school before and the formal steps necessary may be complex.

To assist families, some choice plans provide information about decision-making itself and about how to identify important features of schools. Materials are directed both to parents and to students.

In Boston, students in middle school spend classroom time discussing how to decide what high school to choose in the city-wide controlled choice system. *An Exercise in Decision Making: Choosing a High School* is a workbook for middle school students and teachers. It covers what to look for in order to learn about differences in high schools that could affect a student's high school experience and prospects for higher education or specific career goals.

The workbook suggests that students think about "where [they would] like to be in five or ten years" and what school package (programs/ features) would be most likely to help them achieve their long term goals. Specific opportunities are described, and

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[1] In the past, Boston included test scores and promotion rates in the printed information that was distributed about schools, but the practice was discontinued.

the workbook suggests what students may want to think about or learn more about to help them make their decisions.

In Cambridge, Massachusetts, parents receive the Cambridge Public Schools Student Assignment and Elementary Application Information Packet, which includes a one page appendix labeled "Choosing Schools: A Guide for Parents." The guide explains that:

> "While the choice of schools and programs that Cambridge parents make is varied, so are the reasons. Although choosing a school and/or program that is close to home is popular, other considerations should be taken into account."

A "chart" is provided to "help [families] formulate [their] choice." The chart consists of a list of possible considerations with space provided to check whether each consideration is "very important, fairly important, or not important" to the family. The eighteen considerations listed include nearness to school, style of teaching, parental involvement, cultural/racial composition, continuing friendships developed at pre-school, educational program and physical facilities.

Minnesota developed a pilot computer software program based on the Cambridge sheet to help people with the process of deciding what school to choose. Families indicate which features are important to them and are then guided through a list of ways that preferences can be clarified within each area. The questions and examples of answers can clarify preferences in the minds of those using the program.

The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement produced a booklet entitled *Choosing a School for Your Child* that has an extensive "checklist" (with spaces to answer questions) for parents to complete on schools of interest. The checklist is divided into the following sections: curriculum; philosophy; important policies; proof of results; school resources; parent and community involvement; reputation, and special questions for private and church-affiliated schools.

Applying for Schools

Once parents decide which school they would like their child to attend, they are usually required to submit an application requesting that their child be assigned to that school. Usually parents are asked to select first, second, and third choices. Regardless of how conscientiously parents have accomplished the school selection process, children will not be assigned to their schools of choice unless the application procedures are followed carefully.

The standard system for letting people know how they can apply to a particular school is to tell them where the application can be found, what to do with it once it has been completed, and when it has to be submitted. In Tacoma, Washington, parents receive a letter stating that if they "are interested in being considered for an optional middle/high school assignment, they should complete the attached application and return it to the school [their] child currently attends between the dates of February 25 and March 8." Often this information is also included in program directories distributed by school districts, but it is not typically found in materials describing single schools.

How Requests are Processed

Knowing how a system makes student assignments can influence families' requests and increase the chance that students will be happy with the outcome. For example, consider parents who have a daughter attending a high school of performing arts and a middle-school son who wants to attend a high school of performing arts when he is ready for high school. There are two such schools in the district which are of equal interest to the family. If the family knows that the school his sister attends gives priority to siblings of current students, they will know that selecting this school instead of the other will give the student a better chance of being able to attend a high school of performing arts.

The parent information center in Holyoke, Massachusetts has a criteria list for student assignment. Numbered one through eleven, the items are residence, ethnic/racial balance, class size, transportation impact, siblings, past school attendance, past magnet participation, special service needs, gender, application time-frames, and lottery. Thus, parents are clearly informed of how the school district will assign students to schools.

Fall River, Massachusetts provides a more precise set of information concerning the process of student assignment in the *Fall River Student Assignment Policy*. Item A.4. reads:

> All final assignment decisions will be made by the District's Student Assignment Officer subject to the constraints of minority balance and space availability at grade-level. In the event of oversubscription, the priority of assignment will be as follows:
>
> a. Sibling Preference
> b. Minority Balance
> c. Children who live closest to the school
> d. Random Lottery

This indicates not only the criteria for assignment, but also the priority for considering each criterion.

Milwaukee includes a multi-page table in the back of *Directions*, its booklet that describes school options, to indicate how many "seats" are available to "Black" students, "Non-black" students, and "Suburban" students (each listed separately). This allows families to assess the chance of a student being granted a place in a particular school based on the number of spaces available for a child who fits the applicant classification of the student in question.

As the above illustrations suggest, specific descriptions of assignment criteria are more common in choice plans that are associated with improving racial balance among the schools.

Format

In order to convey a message, information must be presented in a manner that allows an audience to understand it. Exhibit 2 summarizes the formats for information about school choice that are used by school systems, schools, nonprofit and for-profit organizations, and government agencies.

Exhibit 2
FORMATS USED FOR INFORMATION ABOUT SCHOOL CHOICE

Print	One-page leaflet or flyer; Poster; Bookmark; Billboard; Brochure; Booklet; Book; Letter; Newspaper and magazine advertisement; Newspaper article.
Audio/visual	Video production; TV bulletin board; Public service announcement.
Interactive	Telephone hot-line; Computer software.
In-person contact	Students; Teachers; Parents; Administrative staff.
On-site presentations	Open house at school; Tour of school; Presentations to represent school.

Printed Materials

Print is the most common medium used to circulate information about school choice plans. The format used for these materials is often influenced by the content being covered. For example:

Brochures usually describe individual schools or programs.

Booklets are commonly used by school districts to give an overview of the options available to families in the school choice plan.

Posters and billboards tend to be used to get people's attention and tell them about the existence of school choice.

Newspaper and magazine advertisements are often used to notify families of events where more information will be provided, to inform them of deadlines for applying to schools, or to provide basic information about a program as an enticement for people to find out more.

One-page leaflets and flyers often convey the same information that would be contained in a newspaper or magazine advertisement. They may also be used to reach specific subpopulations by presenting a piece of information boldly that would be more subtle in printed materials for the general public. These materials are very popular because they can be produced at low cost and changed easily and inexpensively.

Books are published primarily by nonprofit and for-profit groups as comprehensive guides to schools of choice in particular areas. They are seldom if ever produced by the public sector to inform families about school choice, probably because they are expensive to produce and update.

Letters pertaining to school choice are typically sent directly to families (usually, if not always, addressed to parents) to provide information about application procedures and how to find out about the schools.

Bookmarks are used to provide information that families might want to refer to on numerous occasions. For instance, Memphis City Schools has a bookmark with their Optional Schools slogan, address and phone number; the National Committee for Citizens in Education has a bookmark with "8 key questions for parents and citizens to ask public officials" about school choice on one side and tips on "how to reach every family with information about public school choice" on the other side.

Printed materials vary in the extent to which they combine writing, symbols and pictures. Most rely heavily on writing, although many are quite professional in their design and use of graphics and illustrations.

Written materials are available in many languages in some cases, but are produced in English only or English and Spanish only in other cases. Materials may also notify readers in several languages of where to phone for additional information in those languages.

Audio/Visual Materials

The most common form of audio/visual materials used to inform people about school choice are videos about individual schools and programs that are offered. In Lowell, Massachusetts, videos are collected by the district from individual schools. In Cambridge, Massachusetts, the Cambridge Partnership for Public Education produced a professional video with the help of Polaroid. Cambridge also records school activities in progress and shows these less formal videos to families. These videos are available through Parent Information Centers. Other video presentations include endorsements for choice on television. In Tacoma, Washington, spot announcements have been played showing the Governor speaking about school choice.

The use of public service announcements is a popular (and less expensive) approach to sharing information about school choice. Announcements are made on the radio to inform people of options they may not know about, advertise programs, and remind parents of deadlines for submitting applications to enroll students in programs of choice. In Minneapolis, public service announcements are made in six different languages.

Interactive Technology

Computers can offer an interactive format for informing families about their schooling options. In Minnesota, PEAKSolutions, a private firm, received a contract from the state to produce a prototype and pilot software package that helps families identify their educational priorities and select schools that match their list of preferences.

Less high-tech but interactive nonetheless, telephone hot-lines also provide access to information about schools. The U.S. Department of Education operates one such service (1-800-442-pick) that was established to help families throughout the country learn about choice in education. Most school districts with choice also advertise phone numbers that can be called for information. These allow parents to inquire about topics that may not be included in the prepared materials.

In-person Contact

In addition to distributing prepared materials, many school districts have established formal arrangements for parents to learn about school choice through in-person contact with knowledgeable school staff and parents. For example, students and teachers may

visit schools with students in lower grades to inform them about their middle school or high school options. "Parent Liaisons" in Massachusetts school districts with choice are parents of students in each school who serve as contact persons for parents of new or prospective students as well as acting as liaisons between parents and the schools' administrations.

On-site Presentations

Another strategy for informing people about a school or program is to demonstrate what is offered. School tours are designed to highlight the best facilities and equipment of a school. Presentations by students serve as indicators of how a student can learn to perform -- in the arts or public speaking. "Open house" events allow families to visit and observe schools. Many schools invite parents and students to sit in on a class and get a feel for what the school is like on regular school days. Presentations and visits provide information about the type of students that attend the school, interaction among students, and interaction between students and teachers.

Distribution

After informational materials are prepared, they need to be distributed to their intended audiences. Careful distribution is as critical to an effective information system as appropriate content and format. Exhibit 3 shows an overview of distribution strategies.

Exhibit 3

DISTRIBUTION OF SCHOOL CHOICE INFORMATION

A. School System

1. Parent Information Centers
2. Schools
3. School Fairs

B. Residences

1. Mail
2. Telephone
3. Radio
4. Television
5. Newspapers (and magazines)
6. Flyers
7. People

C. Community

1. Block parties
2. State Fairs
3. Health Care Centers
4. Social Service Agencies
5. Stores
6. Religious Institutions
7. Community Centers
8. Day Care Centers
9. Streets
10. Real Estate Offices

Through the School System

A major way to get information about school choice to families is to direct the flow of information through the school system itself. School systems distribute information about school choice in two primary ways. One is to support centers or activities for all families, even those without children in the schools. For example, some areas have parent information centers (such as those in Massachusetts) or a district level office established to monitor and administer centralized enrollment. Requiring parents to visit such centers in order to register their children for school assures that all families will be exposed to the information provided at the center. School fairs in which many schools participate at a common site are held in many school choice districts to allow families to learn about different schools on the same occasion.

The other primary route for distribution of information through the school system is through individual schools. Schools may give information directly to parents, send the materials home with the children, or mail information to the students' homes. Parents in Chicago are given information when they come to the school to pick up their child's report card. In District 4 of New York, students are given information as a class activity.

These are effective strategies for getting information to every family that has children in the school system, without distributing it unnecessarily to families without school-aged children. However, this method of distribution does not allow families whose children are not currently attending school (e.g, pre-schoolers, dropouts, children in nonparticipating schools) to learn about their options.

Directly to Residences

Direct mail is used not only to get information to the parents of children at a particular school, but also to inform an entire district's families or a select sub-population of families. In St. Paul, information about public school choice is sent to every residence.

Radio and television are used to reach people in their living rooms (as well as other places) to provide school choice information. Clearly, choosing the stations to air these announcements affects the particular audiences that are reached. Although we found no instances in which school systems initiated phone calls to families for the

purpose of informing them about school choice, families can place calls to hot-lines, school administration offices, schools themselves, and non-profit organizations to get information about school choice.

Newspapers and magazines delivered to residences can contain advertisements and news articles about school choice. In Cambridge, an insert is placed in one issue of the local newspaper each year that unfolds to a poster-size sheet of information (entitled Cambridge Schools at a Glance) that has a large map of the area and its public schools on the back.

In some cases, representatives of a school program have gone to peoples' homes to discuss school choice and brought printed materials with them. For example, at the fall of 1990 opening of the Connection Center (an Area Learning Center that is part of the Minneapolis state-wide school choice program), teachers took flyers and brochures to people in the nearby housing projects and talked with family members about the new educational programs being offered.

Through the Community

Community gatherings and places in the community where vital services are distributed provide an opportunity to distribute information about school choice to a wide audience. For example, state fairs sometimes have school choice booths, and doctors' offices may post notices and distribute brochures. Billboards may also be used to distribute information about school choice. In Minnesota, advertisements were printed on grocery store bags. In both Minnesota and Massachusetts, information about school choice has been enclosed with welfare checks.

District administrators who are introducing school choice plans and staff who are recruiting students to particular schools often speak at churches, other religious institutions, and community centers. Pre-schools and daycare centers are frequently visited by representatives of elementary schools.

The efforts made by the Connection Center staff, noted above, reach beyond the delivery of printed materials to potential students at their homes. Following the settlement movement of social work as their model, the staff went into the streets and talked with people in the community about their program. During the summer, they

attended block parties and broadcast their message over loud speakers. Teachers also began canvassing the community as soon as the center opened. These efforts were so effective that The Connection Center exceeded its enrollment goals and stopped actively recruiting students.

Real estate agencies are often asked to provide information about schools of choice to clients who are new to the area. In Memphis, realtors asked regularly for the public schools' information about Optional Schools, so the school system began sending its annual booklet to them routinely.

Designing Information Systems

Most information providers agree that a multi-faceted approach is necessary to give families the information they need to fully benefit from school choice. We found that the assortment of approaches used varies greatly, but that each is based on some combination of content, format, and distribution.

Some combinations are fairly widespread while others are unique. For example, schools often provide information to parents by sending notices home with currently enrolled students. In our framework, a notice to parents about school choice represents a common combination of the three elements. This type of notice informs parents that choice exists and how to learn more about it (content); it is presented in a one-page flyer (format); and it is sent home from school with students (distribution). An example of a more unusual combination is the advertisement printed on grocery store bags used in Minnesota that lets people know that educational options exist. This strategy used an unusual format distributed through a community mechanism, to let dropouts know about options for returning to school.

Efforts Toward Equity

Our discussions with practitioners suggest that innovative approaches to information about choice have generally been motivated by the desire to assure that information systems operate in an equitable manner -- that is, to assure that families have similar access to materials and equal opportunity to learn more about their education options. Perhaps the most basic example is the use of public service announcements that are sent to a variety of radio and television stations.

However, providing everyone with the same information in the same format may not allow all families equal access to the information. Some parents may not understand materials in English; some may not be able to read or write; and some may not be able to visit centers or attend events because of transportation, child care, or work schedules. Schools, school districts, and states that provide information for school choice have responded to these concerns in a variety of ways.

In Cambridge, interpreters are available at information meetings to translate information into Portuguese, Spanish, Haitian and Chinese. At the 1991 St. Paul's School Fair, a "Bilingual Help Booth" was set up with interpreters of Hmong, Khmer, Spanish and Vietnamese. Arrangements were also made to have an interpreter for the hearing impaired available.

As another example of showing attentiveness to language needs, the inside cover of the Boston Public Schools booklet, *Controlled Choice Student Assignment Information,* notes that the information contained in the guide is also available in Cambodian, Chinese, French, Greek, Italian, Laotian, Portuguese, Spanish and Vietnamese. The statement that the information is available in different languages is written in each of these languages so people who don't read English can learn that the guide is available in the languages they do speak. New York City's District 4's printed information about schools is distributed to everyone in Spanish and English.

Minneapolis Public Schools ran public service announcements in English, Spanish, Hmong, Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Lao for the 1991-1992 school choice registration. The Montgomery County school system in Maryland has a public service announcement played on the Spanish radio station.

To help parents who have low literacy skills, Lowell, Massachusetts takes a sensitive approach to registering students. All parents in Lowell must register their children for school at a parent information center, where staff work with all families to fill out the appropriate forms, and no parents are embarrassed by inability to read or write.

Although school fairs and state fairs and school open-houses are open to everyone, some families do not attend because they lack transportation or daycare. At the St. Paul Fair, free day care is provided as well as free refreshments and parking. We were told

that free bussing was also available, but the promotional materials about the fair did not include this information.

A more aggressive approach to distributing information targets some information exclusively to disadvantaged families who are likely not to be reached through several methods. In both Massachusetts and Minnesota, information was provided with welfare checks to let dropouts know about opportunities for going back to school.

Information may also be targeted to those who live in particular neighborhoods or attend particular schools. If a particular neighborhood school is overcrowded and the school system is encouraging students to request another school, information about other options may be sent to families whose children attend that school. Similarly, schools may want to recruit students from particular neighborhoods. In Chicago, schools can request mailing labels from the district office for all families of a particular race/ethnicity with children of the appropriate ages living within bussing range. Thus, a school concerned about attracting enough students of a minority race/ethnicity can target its information distribution to those families.

Equity Concerns

Our study also points out areas in which current systems do not adequately address equity issues. This results in some families having less information than others, and consequently less knowledge to draw on when choosing among the available school options.

Clearly, equity concerns arise when informational materials are difficult for some families to understand because of their content or format. We have discussed the issue of availability of information in languages other than English. Although this is an area in which major efforts are being made, many families do not have access to information in a language they understand. Even when families do know the language, they may find it difficult to understand printed materials because of the reading difficulty levels.

Furthermore, brochures and booklets frequently use education jargon that is not familiar to many parents. For example, the School Selection Catalog from Milwaukee describes the international studies program at Walker, a middle school, as follows:

> Walker's specialty provides a sound, globally oriented, middle school education. The internationally focused social studies and second language (French, German, Spanish) source offerings are the heart of the program. The specialty curriculum, including the Program for the Academically Talented (PAT), is enhanced by interdisciplinary, cultural "hands-on" activities.

Information may also be difficult to interpret if it has been designed to promote a particular program or school. These materials are more likely than those describing multiple programs to emphasize positive aspects and provide less of the basic descriptive information that provides a base for comparison among schools. These materials run the risk of coming to resemble the advertisements typical of private tutoring programs, but we did not find this to be true. More common were very general descriptions, such as "dedicated staff," "lively discussion and intellectual exploration," or "learning and growing."

Problems may arise in the distribution of information if people first need to know that materials exist in order to acquire them. We called the Federal government's hot-line on choice three times before being able to obtain a copy of *Choosing a School for Your Child*. This is an excellent resource on general issues related to school choice and is available in both Spanish and English, but we had to ask for it by name in order to obtain it. We were told that generally it is not distributed except when someone specifically requests it. One operator said they prefer for "people to ask for information directly. That way, [they] know it's being used for the most good."

In some cases the inequitable distribution of information is a result of practices intrinsic to the information systems themselves. High schools recruit at middle schools, middle schools at elementary schools, and elementary schools at preschools and day-care centers. Frequently, schools have discretion to select the schools in which they recruit, thus they may provide information only to those schools viewed as most likely to supply the most desirable students. Indeed, selective recruiting has contributed to the criticism that school choice policies promote an elitist approach to schooling.

Lack of Performance Information

Beyond very basic descriptive information, the materials we examined typically described schools using ambiguous language about programmatic philosophy and teaching methods, content of courses, and extra-curricular activities. In all the

information we collected about schools of choice, we found no materials that contained school-wide performance data. Although schools are being pressured for performance measures as a source of accountability, schools of choice seldom distribute this type of information routinely to families. Average test scores, grade retention rates, graduation rates, and college attendance rates -- all are missing from the materials we collected from schools of choice throughout the country.

In fact, little quantitative data are included in any choice materials, even basic facts about schools. Among the exceptions to this pattern are the Boston Public Schools and the Abraham Lincoln High School in San Jose. Boston presents the racial/ethnic distribution of students enrolled in each school and the student and teacher average daily attendance figures for each school. Abraham Lincoln High School provides evidence that some of its students are high achievers, but does not indicate the achievement levels of the rest of the students.

This general lack of quantitative data in school information for families stands in contrast to the current reform agenda call for "report cards" and other presentations of data to assess the quality of schools. Ironically, families are being asked to choose a school based on informational materials that contain no data about how well the schools help their students to achieve. Murnane (1986) notes that program staff regard providing this type of information as an encroachment of their professional judgment, although the current climate for increased testing and disclosure suggests that it will be made available more frequently in the future.

Concluding Comments

Our goal has primarily been to collect and analyze materials that school systems and others have developed to inform families about schooling options. In the process, we have learned about how these materials are distributed, including strategies that involve reaching families in person.

The fact that information in the formal materials *about particular schools* is quite limited makes it very important to consider them as only one component of the overall effort to ensure that families have the knowledge they need to make informed choices. In addition to providing basic descriptive information about how the system operates, the most important role of informational materials may be to attract parents to seek

additional information through in-person contact with school staff and through attending school activities.

In closing, we would like to recognize that we have not explored the role of friends, relatives, and neighbors in providing information to families about particular schools. Just as in making other important decisions, parents undoubtedly seek the opinions of those they trust and respect when choosing schools. Information systems should not overlook this factor.

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APPENDIX

MATERIALS ABOUT SCHOOLING OPTIONS

California

San Diego	Making Your Educational Dreams Come True. Magnet Programs: San Diego City. 1990-91.
San José	Choices Catalog. San José Unified School District. 1991-1992.

Illinois

Chicago	Options for Knowledge. Department of Equal Education Opportunity Programs: Chicago Public Schools. Fall 1990.

Maryland

Montgomery County	Magnet School Programs. Montgomery County Public Schools.
Prince George's County	A School System of Choices. Department of Public Affairs and Communications: Magnet School Office: Prince George's County Public Schools.

Massachusetts

Boston	An Exercise in Decision Making: Choosing a High School. High School Zone Office: Boston Public Schools. 1990.
	Controlled Choice Student Assignment Information. Department of Implementation: Boston Public Schools. 1990-1991.
Cambridge	Cambridge Public Schools Student Assignment and Elementary Application Information. Parent Information Center: Cambridge Public Schools.
Fall River	Fall River Student Assignment Policy. Adopted February 1987.
Holyoke	Expanded Choices for Excellence. Parent Information Center: Holyoke Public Schools.

Minnesota

Minneapolis — A Guide to High School Programs. Magnet Office: Minneapolis Public Schools. 1990.

St. Paul — "Commonly Asked Questions About District Magnet and Specialty Schools." Magnet and Specialty School Choices: St. Paul Public Schools. 1990-1991.

"If he wants to quit school, he doesn't need a lecture. He needs an alternative." Graduation Incentives Program by Citizens League.

The School Book: 1990-1991. A Comprehensive Guide to Elementary Schools in the Twin Cities. Minneapolis: 1989.

New Jersey

Montclair — Montclair's Magnets. Montclair Public Schools.

New York

New York Community School District — Alternative Concept Schools: Educational Options for Excellence. New York Community School District 4.

Tennessee

Memphis — Optional Schools. Optional Schools Office: Memphis City Schools. 1990.

Washington

Tacoma — To Parents of Fifth Grade Students. Optional Enrollment: Tacoma Public Schools. 1991.

Wisconsin

Milwaukee — Directions. School Selection Catalog: Milwaukee Public Schools. 1991-1992.

United States Department of Education — Choosing a School for Your Child.